Pay attention to your holiday turkey

Thanksgiving and Christmas are often occasions to serve roast turkey. Turkey, an easy dish to prepare, requires just a little attention from the cook while it is roasting.

Cooks should take care to get the bird thawed safely, however, so that microorganisms which might cause a food-borne illness are not given a chance to grow.

Here are three ways to safely thaw a frozen turkey:

Leave it in its original plastic bag and place it on a tray in the refrigerator. It will take about 24 hours for each five pounds of turkey to thaw, said Virginia Tech Extension specialist in foods and nutrition Jo Anne Barton. That means a 15-pound turkey will take three days.

Often, there isn't enough space in a family's refrigerator for the bird to be there for three days. Consequently, a person may want to try another method that is a little faster, Miss Barton said.

Leave the turkey in its bag and place it in a container of cold water. Remember to change the water frequently. This method takes about half an hour per pound of turkey, or about eight hours for a 15-pound bird.

Those who have microwave ovens can use them to thaw their birds by following the oven's directions. She gave the following general directions.

The defrost or low heat setting is used for thawing. It will take five to 10 minutes per pound depending on the size of the bird. Naturally, the large birds will take longer to thaw than smaller ones.

Refrigerate or cook the turkey as soon as it is thawed, the specialist said. She reminded the holiday cooks that safety considerations are an important part of cooking, too.

Stuffing or dressing does not have to be cooked inside the turkey but can be baked in a regular baking dish in the oven.

Those who plan to stuff the turkey need to clean the internal cavity by rinsing it with water. Place the turkey in the oven immediately after preparing the stuffing and putting it in the turkey.

If a meat thermometer is being used, insert it in the thick part of the thigh so that it is near the center of the meat and not touching a bone.

Place the turkey in an oven at 325 to 350 degrees Fahrenheit for the recommended length of time, based on the weight of the bird or until the internal temperature is 185 degrees Fahrenheit. A 15-pound turkey will take between four-and-a-half and five-and-a-half hours to cook.

"An unstuffed turkey may take less time," the faculty member in Tech's College of Human Resources said. Keep the temperature of the oven at about 325 to 350 degrees Fahrenheit for the entire time the turkey is cooking, she said. Do not let it drop below that because bacteria can grow in temperatures cooler than that.

Plan ahead for holidays

A person can spend time with family and friends during the holidays--not with an oven--by planning ahead.

Look at the events being planned by the family, allow time for some spur of the moment festivities and then make lists of what foods will be needed for the meals, said a Virginia Tech Extension specialist in foods and nutrition.

Involve the whole family in the planning, Jo Anne Barton said. Look at the calendar and see how many family meals will be eaten together, when there will be guests and when members of the family might be away.

"Write the possible menus and remember to include those foods that have become family traditions," Miss Barton said.

Then make a grocery list and shop early.

Having all family members involved in the planning also helps them to be responsible for some of the work. Some family members can be responsible for the table settings. Check the tablecloths, special serving dishes, silver, candles--items that are used only on special occasions--to see that they are clean, shiny, and ready to use.

"Some cooking can be done ahead and the items frozen," Miss Barton said. Dishes, or even whole meals, prepared ahead allow the host and hostess more time to enjoy visiting with guests and family members. Some dishes particularly suited to freezing are sandwiches, cookies, breads and rolls. Many main dishes can be made in double batches. One can be served while the other is frozen.

On turkeys and servings

To help make plans for holiday meals of roast turkey, Virginia Tech Extension specialists in foods and nutrition have provided this chart showing the average number of servings in turkeys of various sizes.

Pounds	Servings
6- 8	6 - 12
8-12	10 - 20
12 - 16	20 - 30
16 - 20	32 - 40
20 - 24	40 - 59

Clean the cutting board

Before the holiday season might be a good time to really clean the cutting board -- before the cook starts preparing those special holiday dishes.

To clean it, and remove stubborn bacteria, scrub the board with soap and rinse in hot water, and then rinse it in a solution of a quarter cup of chlorine bleach in a gallon of water, said Virginia Tech Extension specialist in foods and nutrition.

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